Two records of Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* in Sabah – the first definite occurrences in Malaysia and Borneo

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Towards the end of a wildlife tour of Sabah (of which I was the leader), a one night visit was made to Pulau Tiga National Park, a few kilometres off the west coast of Sabah. In the early afternoon of 16 October 1996, while members of the group were enjoying a siesta, I found a lone bunting *Emberiza* feeding on grass seeds along the fringe of a mown lawn area behind the staff quarters. The bunting showed little concern as I watched it for about 20 minutes from a range of about 20 m, but when I eventually approached a little nearer it flew to perch in a nearby sapling. It was still feeding in the same area when I returned later with three group members, by which time it was associating with a flock of about 10 Eurasian Tree Sparrows *Passer montanus*, but it was not found during a brief search on the next day.

First impressions were of a large, robust, long-tailed bunting in first-winter type plumage and, immediately, I was certain that it was either a Black-headed Bunting *E. melanocephala* or a Red-headed Bunting *E. bruniceps*. I have considerable experience of *melanocephala* in Europe in spring and autumn, including first-winters, and also three critically examined autumn first-winters in Shetland, and I have experience of *bruniceps* in adult and first-winter plumages in India. Prolonged critical observation of both structure and plumage of the bunting enabled me to identify it as a first-winter *melanocephala* of indeterminate sex.

Size and structure: A large, robust bunting with a large head, a stout, rather long and pointed bill, and a longish tail. The large size was particularly apparent when it was among Eurasian Tree Sparrows, and the tail of the bunting appeared perhaps 2 cm longer than that of a sparrow.

Primary projection: At rest, five primaries showed well beyond the longest tertial (*E. bruniceps* usually only shows four primaries).

Upperparts: Crown sandy greyish-brown, finely streaked darker. Indistinct pale buffy supercilium and pale buffy lores, ear-coverts a little darker greyish-buff, sides of neck pale buff. Nape sandy greyish-brown, only faintly streaked; mantle and back sandy greyish-brown, more strongly streaked darker; scapulars with dark centres tinged chestnut and pale gingery-buff fringes. Rump and uppertail-coverts strongly tinged chestnut; tail feathers brown with sandy-buff fringes, but no white on outer pair. Wing-coverts and flight feathers all greyish-brown with pale buff fringes, tinged chestnut on largest alula feather.

Underparts: Chin and throat creamy-white, breast similar with fine dark streaks extending faintly onto upper flanks; lower breast tinged yellowish, increasingly yellow through belly and ventral area to quite bright yellow undertail-coverts.

Bare parts: Eye black; bill uniform mid-grey; legs and feet pinkish-brown.

No call heard.

Although many first-winter individuals of the species pair, *E. melanocephala* and *E. bruniceps*, are extremely difficult to identify specifically with certainty, and sometimes are impossible to determine in the field even with prolonged close range observations (Byers *et al.* 1995, Harris *et al.* 1996), this particular individual showed several characters which, in combination, left me in no doubt that it was *melanocephala*. Those important characters were: five primaries clearly showing beyond longest tertial; extent of yellow on underparts; centres of rump feathers and uppertail-coverts strongly tinged chestnut; centres of scapulars tinged chestnut; bill proportions.

This record has been accepted by the Records Committee of the Malaysian Nature Society and constitutes the first for Malaysia and the first definite record for Borneo.

I returned to Pulau Tiga with another wildlife tour group one year later, on 22 October 1997. That afternoon, to my utter amazement, one member of the group, Andrew Allport, found another first-winter bunting in exactly the same area of the island, and identified it as a Black-headed Bunting. Quite remarkably, the next morning we found that there were in fact three buntings, mostly keeping in close company and all showing characters to convince us that all three were first-winter *melanocephala*. Several photographs were obtained of one of the individuals. This multiple occurrence constitutes the second record for Malaysia and Borneo.

There have been at least 18 other extralimital records of Black-headed Buntings in eastern Asia: 12 in Japan up to 1991 (Brazil 1991), two in Fujian Province, China (La Touche 1925-1934), two in Hong Kong (Leader 1996), one in Thailand (Boonsong and Round 1991) and one in Laos (Thewlis 1995). In addition, there have been six indeterminate records of *melanocephala/bruniceps* (involving eight individuals) in Hong Kong and two records of 'probable' *melanocephala* in Brunei (Mann 1987 and 1989).

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Green-faced Parrotfinch *Erythrura viridifacies* in northern Luzon, Philippines

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Green-faced Parrotfinch *Erythrura viridifacies* is a little-known and apparently rare species endemic to the Philippines and currently considered 'Endangered'. A single bird was encountered near Dumalneg in northern Ilocos Norte Province, at c. 100 m altitude, on 9 February 1994. Dumalneg lies near the north coast of Luzon at the edge of a large area of logged and primary forest. The bird was first sighted at about noon, in full sunlight on a rock by a small streamlet, in a largely cleared valley with scattered trees and much climbing bamboo. It flushed into a patch of bushes enclosing a stream but I was able to approach to within about 3 m of it and saw that it was holding a bamboo seed of c. 3-4 mm diameter in its mouth. The seed seemed rather too big for the bird to deal with and it later dropped it but I suspect it was feeding on these seeds, which were common in the area. The bird appeared very similar to the portrait in Clement and Harris (1993) but the edges of the primaries appeared distinctly darker, forming a blackish panel and the eye was slightly larger. This bird was known by my guide as 'saamut', (which is also the local name for a kind of fruit) but he described it as rare.

There have been rather few records of this species (Dickinson *et al.* 1991, Poulsen 1995), the only previously published recent one(s) (Collar *et al.* 1994) having been that of the survey at Dalton Pass (Alonzo-Pasicolan 1992). Since then it has been netted three times at 650-700 m in the Pandan peninsula of Panay by the PESCP team in 1996 (de Soye *et al.* in prep.), and sighted once there this year at c. 30 m (E. Curio pers. comm.); one bird was also seen by a survey team in 1996 in Orani Municipality in the Bataan peninsula (NORDECO and DENR 1998). Climbing bamboo was abundant at both of these latter two sites, *Dinochloa* in Bataan, and possibly *Schizostachyum* in Panay. It may be that the distribution of this species is principally determined by the distribution of such bamboo. Given the very quiet and usually shy behaviour of its congener Red-eared Parrotfinch *Erythrura coloria*, it is quite likely to be easily overlooked. A photograph of one of the Panay birds in de Soye (1997) is consistent with my observations of the plumage as given above.

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